**What is sundowning and how is it treated?**

Answer From Jonathan Graff-Radford, M.D.

The term "sundowning" refers to a state of confusion occurring in the late afternoon and spanning into the night. Sundowning can cause a variety of behaviors, such as confusion, anxiety, aggression or ignoring directions. Sundowning can also lead to pacing or wandering.

Sundowning isn't a disease, but a group of symptoms that occur at a specific time of the day that may affect people with dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease. The exact cause of this behavior is unknown.

**Factors that may aggravate late-day confusion include:**

* Fatigue
* Low lighting
* Increased shadows
* Disruption of the body's "internal clock"
* Difficulty separating reality from dreams
* Presence of an infection such as urinary tract infection

**Tips for reducing sundowning:**

* Try to maintain a predictable routine for bedtime, waking, meals and activities.
* Plan for activities and exposure to light during the day to encourage nighttime sleepiness.
* Limit daytime napping.
* Limit caffeine and sugar to morning hours.
* Keep a night light on to reduce agitation that occurs when surroundings are dark or unfamiliar.
* In the evening, try to reduce background noise and stimulating activities, including TV viewing, which can sometimes be upsetting.
* In a strange or unfamiliar setting, bring familiar items — such as photographs — to create a more relaxed, familiar setting.
* Play familiar gentle music in the evening or relaxing sounds of nature, such as the sound of waves.
* Talk with your loved one's doctor if you suspect that an underlying condition, such as a urinary tract infection or sleep apnea, might be worsening sundowning behavior, especially if sundowning develops quickly.

Some research suggests that a low dose of melatonin — a naturally occurring hormone that induces sleepiness — alone or in combination with exposure to bright light during the day may help ease sundowning.

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Andrea Korsunsky, Director of Seniors At Home’s [Center for Dementia Care](https://seniorsathome.jfcs.org/dementia-care/), says, “Sundowning is more likely to affect those who are in the mid or late stages of dementia. And while doctors are not certain what causes sundowning, fading light appears to be the trigger.”

If you are caring for someone that experiences sundowning, there are various ways to minimize the behaviors during this challenging part of the day. Below are Andrea’s top tips to manage the severity of sundown syndrome:

1. **Keep the home well lit in the evenings**. Provide adequate lighting to lessen shadows when it begins to get dark. Since fading light can be a trigger, maintaining a well lit environment can minimize the change in behavior.
2. **Keep your loved one active and distracted at the time when sundowning may occur**. For example, have them help prepare dinner, set the table, or take on another simple task at that time.
3. **Create a safe and comfortable sleeping environment**. Keep the room temperature moderate for sleeping and provide nightlights (if desired) and any other security means to help the person with dementia feel safe, reducing agitation.
4. **Stick to a strict and predictable schedule**. Maintaining a daily schedule is key to keeping a healthy sleep pattern, reducing the likelihood for sundowning later in the day. In addition, planning regular exercise or [activities](https://seniorsathome.jfcs.org/connectivity-toolkit/) during the day (such as brisk walks, the stationary bike, or [social day programs](https://seniorsathome.jfcs.org/skyviewdayclub/)) may reduce restlessness at night.
5. **Avoid stimulants.** Alcohol, coffee, soda, and nicotine can all interfere with sleep cycles, especially for those experiencing dementia.
6. **Keep a journal.**Record the times when sundowning occurs—this can help you pinpoint triggers and determine which strategies help to ease them.
7. **Surround the person with dementia with familiar and comforting things**. Whether it is a comfortable chair, pictures of loved ones, favorite music, or a particular smell (lavender, pine, etc.), these items may ease agitation or disorientation.
8. **Talk to a professional**. If symptoms of sundowning are impacting quality of life for you and the person you care for, consider seeking a [professional dementia care consultation](https://seniorsathome.jfcs.org/dementia-care/). Dementia care experts can help you determine underlying causes of sundowning and to put new strategies in place to reduce challenging behaviors.

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